



## Coast Guard HR Flag Voice 158

### COPING WITH TRAUMATIC INCIDENTS

**In the wake of the terrorist attacks this week, all of us are reacting differently to these traumatic events.** Our reactions may be emotional, physical, mental or behavioral. Sometimes, the emotional “aftershocks” from stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

**The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last for days, weeks, months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event.** With understanding and support from our co-workers, family and friends, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance may be helpful. This does not imply mental illness or weakness - it simply indicates that this particular event was just too powerful for us to manage alone.

**To help understand our reactions to a traumatic event, it may be helpful to know the common signs and signals of a stress reaction.** Some examples:

**Physical** - Fatigue, Insomnia, Muscle Tremors, Twitches, Difficulty Breathing, Rapid Breathing, Elevated Blood Pressure, Rapid Heartbeat, Chest Pain, Headaches, Visual Difficulties, Nausea/Vomiting, Thirst, Hunger, Dizziness, Excessive Sweating, Chills, Weakness, or Fainting.

**Mental** - Confusion, Tendency to Blame Others, Poor Attention, Inability to Make Decisions, Heightened or Lowered Alertness, Poor Concentration, Forgetfulness, Trouble Identifying Known Objects or People, Increased or Decreased Awareness of Surroundings, Poor Problem Solving, Loss of Sense of Time, Place or Person, Disturbed Thinking, Nightmares, Inescapable Images, Flashback, Suicidal Ideas, Disbelief, Change in Values, or Search for Meaning.

**Emotional** - Anxiety, Survivor Guilt/Self-Blame, Grief, Denial, Severe Pain (Rare), Fear of Loss, Fear of Going Crazy, Emotional Numbness, Depression, Lack of Capacity for Enjoyment, Apprehension, Intense Anger, Irritability, Agitation, Helplessness, Mistrust, Feelings of Worthlessness, or Apathy/Boredom.

**Behavioral** - Changes in Normal Activities, Change in Speech, Withdrawal from Others, Emotional Change in Communication, Outbursts, Suspiciousness, Inability to Rest, Substance Abuse, Intensified Startled Reflex, Antisocial Acts, Pacing, Erratic Movements, Decreased Personal Hygiene, Diminished Sexual Drive, Appetite Disturbance, Prolonged Silences, or Accident Prone.

**After exposure to a traumatic event people may need participate in activities that help to reduce the stress.** Though this list may seem a bit simplistic, it does provide some ideas that help many people to cope with stress.

- Take a walk or exercise. Take a bike ride.
- Go to a movie or rent a video.
- Talk to a family member, friend, or neighbor- talking is often the best medicine.
- Mediate or try some relaxation exercises. Soak in a hot bath. Take a nap.
- Decrease your alcohol consumption.
- Make time for leisure activities. Read a book or read the comics.
- Get plenty of sleep - try a glass of warm milk and gentle stretching exercises before sleep.
- Express your feelings about the event to a priest, rabbi or pastor.
- Eat well - avoid excess caffeine and alcohol. Cook a hot meal.
- Try to return to a normal routine as soon as possible. Following a familiar routine restores a sense of security.
- Go out for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Buy an ice cream cone.
- Work in the garden.
- Cut down on stimulation - turn off the TV and turn off or down the radio. Have the children engage in a quiet activity or play outside. TV can lead to further emotional trauma.
- **Seek professional help if symptoms persist.**

**In addition, family members can be very supportive. Here are some ideas on how you can help your family members who have been exposed to traumatic situations:**

- **Listen, listen, listen** - talking is a critical part of recovery. Be supportive and sympathetic, but try to avoid overreacting. Family members need to tell their own story. If a family member tries to shield you from the event by refusing to talk about it, you should not force them to talk about it.
- **Don't encourage your loved one to quit work** - returning to work may be the best way to recover from a crisis. Work can provide the support of others who have been through the same thing.

- **Include the whole family in the healing process** - avoid the tendency to protect children from the upsetting event. They will undoubtedly know that something is wrong if you do. If you try to hide the truth from them, your children may think that they are somehow to blame.

- **Watch for signs of strain in your relationship** - marital problems are common after exposure to a traumatic event.

- **Take care of yourself** - you also need some support. Ask family or friends for help.

**With regard to children,** ChildCareExchange advises that parents may want to talk with older children about a traumatic event and what it might mean, but young children (under the age of 7 or 8) may be disturbed by witnessing scenes of destruction on television or by listening in on adult conversations. It may not be unusual if some young children react by being more clinging, seeming a bit more concerned, or having difficulty at bedtime. Although it might be important to allow older children to participate in viewing and talking about the news, it might be wise to limit young children's exposure to television news. It is important that young children be reassured about their own safety and the safety of their parents and loved ones. Subtle changes in parents' moods and behaviors can have an affect on children, especially if they witness reactions in their parents that they have not seen before. Be prepared to spend extra time with children if necessary, and continue normal routines and activities. Use the opportunity to explain how and why people are reacting the way they are.

**Recovery from traumatic stress can be accomplished in a positive manner with early intervention.** It is also important to use professional and peer-support personnel who are specially trained and follow an established standard of stress intervention techniques. Individuals who are concerned about their reactions to a traumatic event have several resources at their disposal. One option is to use the Coast Guard's **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**. The Coast Guard EAP is available to all military, civilian, non-appropriated fund employees and their family members. It provides a confidential professional assessment and short-term counseling and referral service to help members with their personal, job or family problems. To use the EAP, simply call the following toll free number and make an appointment to see an EAP counselor: **1-800-222-0364**.

**Employee Assistance Program Coordinators (EAPC)** are located at each Integrated Support Command and the Headquarters Support Command. They work with the EAP contractor and other Work-Life staff members to assess and coordinate available assistance and family needs and match services to personnel. **You can also call and visit with an EAPC to address personal, job or family problems.** To contact the office nearest you, **call 1-800-872-4957** followed by the extension listed next to these ISC locations: Alameda (252), Boston (301), Cleveland (309), Honolulu (314), Ketchikan (317), Kodiak (563), Miami (307), New Orleans (308), Portsmouth, (305), San Pedro (311), Seattle (313), St. Louis (302), and Washington, DC (932).

**Medical facilities. Coast Guard Clinics, military treatment facilities, and civilian providers** can provide formal counseling and other mental health services. To access these services, contact your Coast Guard clinic or sickbay, or make an appointment with your primary care manager.

**Another great source of assistance is our dedicated Chaplain Corps.** Our chaplains are well skilled in dealing

with a whole range of personal and family issues, such as dealing with sickness, injury, or death of family members, separation, and divorce.

Additionally, your **chain of command** can also provide assistance.

**Flag Voice 157** also details the Coast Guard's **Critical Incident Stress Management** program, which includes support available for our commands and their personnel involved in a critical incident.

***Stress reactions can be overwhelming, but there is help available.*** If you or a loved one are facing problems, please use the services and/or tools mentioned above to help work through your concerns. No one is immune from stress reactions - but they can be dealt with in a healthy and productive manner. **There are people who care for you -- please let them help you.**

Regards, FL Ames



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